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When Daughters Leave: Essay Writing and The Fugitive Subject

By Kirsty Gunn and Gail Low

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Abstract:

Following Paul Heilker's suggestion in his book, The Essay: Theory and Pedagogy for an Active Form (1996), that we should think of the essay as 'less than a thing than it is an action, less an artifact than an activity, less a noun than a verb', this paper eschews conventional academic forms of critiques and imagines a more open form that makes room for the personal, the subjective, the conceptual and the creative, thus writing critique as a rhetorical, textual and creative performance. Reading and writing about two poems that draw on the myth of Demeter and Persephone, and threaded through by other writers and theorists, and experiences, 'When Daughters Leave' performs a 'tableau vivant' of subjectivity on the page by employing two individual 'I' voices who function both separately, neither a 'we' nor an 'I', to highlight the porous quality of that first person pronoun. The essay also explores the textual and affective terrain of mothers and daughters as subjects and objects of writing, and as metaphors for thinking about subjectivity in an essay about essay writing.

Keywords: Essay, Subjectivity, Mothers, Daughters, Persephone, Demeter, Myth, Language, First person pronoun.

I've always worried about the 'I' in writing. In prose, in fiction or non-fiction. That it takes up so much room, that insistent 'I', overbears in the sentence, in the phrase. I worry that the reader can sustain thought and engagement, spending so much time in its presence, breathing only its air. How can this 'I' be less...central? Be an agent who is invisible, present only in her actions, thoughts – present in the texts without being the one who has to front up ideas, enacting them, speaking over the top of them too. Even in a whisper at the top of her voice is how it feels... to be in the presence of, to always hear the sound of this 'I' 'I' 'I', that first person voice...

Today I read a poem about a mother and her daughter who is leaving:

The only legend I have ever loved is
the story of a daughter lost in hell.
And found and rescued there.
Love and blackmail are the gist of it.
Ceres and Persephone the names.ⁱ

and write,

‘I have a daughter who is leaving home.’
‘And I have a daughter who is leaving home.’

Two women speak here, two teachers, one seated and one standing in a university room, their sentences marking and reflecting a wider dialogue about teaching, life, motherhood, and... essays. ‘I have a daughter who is leaving home,’ I said. ‘And I have a daughter who is leaving home,’ I also said. Might this image of our daughters leaving, as we think about essaying, serve us here?

*

Summer recess. The corridor, once thronged with students and teachers, is deserted and dimly lit. A whiff of abandonment lingers in the air, gaiety removed elsewhere. Light from the office windows filters into the passage through the frosted glazed rectangles made in identical white office doors. These glass cut-outs let you know that someone is waiting on the outside, or that someone is at her desk inside, but never exactly who, a peering face, its Baconesque swirl of colour, coalescing into someone you might know only when you hear the voice on the other side of the door. ‘Are you there?’ But there’s no reply.

Down that silent passage, a note is pinned to a door, writ large in bold, black marker pen. ‘I am in India; back August 28th. If you want to get in touch, please drop me an email and I will endeavour to respond. Urgent requests should be directed to the School

Secretary'. Everyone knows what this note means of course; yet those announcements, so commonplace over the University's summer months, unsettles. How can he say 'I am in India' when he wrote it, affixed to the door while still in Dundee. How can his 'I' be in India at all?

As I read that note, I am disconcerted. I've mistaken writing for speech. But it's only writing, a text unmoored from speaker and hearer. A trivial but important philosophical lesson of language – an absent presence – the pronoun 'I am' always portable, inhabitable. Even I can enter that sentence: I am in India.

In 'The Pomegranate', a poem about the myth of Persephone and her mother, Demeter, or Ceres, as the Romans called her, Eavan Boland's speaker writes,

And the best thing about the legend is
I can enter it anywhere. And have.

So I, too, can enter. The poem. This text. That first person. I can be in the legend anywhere.

'I have a daughter', for example, 'who is leaving...' I can enter that sentence now even though I wrote, 'I have a daughter who is leaving home', much earlier, well before this essay, an idea by two writers, two readers, two women in the university room with daughters who were growing up, began. 'I have a daughter...' is a sentence on the page here, but put there some time ago. By now that same daughter has already left.

And who is this I who goes after her with words to catch her in an essay? And who now speaks... this 'I' that writes?

In the poem, Boland's narrator writes that she read the Persephone story first as:

An exiled child in the crackling dusk of
The underworld, the stars blighted [,]

then, as a mother:

I walked out in a summer twilight
Searching for my daughter at bed-time.

Boland's 'I' is everywhere here, fully present in the stanza's voice and tense, in the poem's speaking mother, and also in the child. All the I...I...I... that crowds the poem – subjectivity, volition and activity – haunting 'The Pomegranate' in the voice who speaks. Not one, but multiple, is this she, an 'I' unravelling herself as she goes, falling away into the very ribbons of phrases, into that crackling dusk only to be superseded by that other subject, a single precious daughter, the figure of the mother's love and desire. Into the dark the 'I' writes herself, into the inescapable night that the poem's past tense reminds us is the future, disappearing, dissolving. In the very moment of our reading, an echo of an another 'I' whose thoughts this poem is,

But I was Ceres then and I knew
Winter was in store for every leaf
On every tree on that road.
Was inescapable for each one we passed.
And for me.

That last line marks another 'I' that steps into the light, who though she barely sounds, is by now a subject herself. Her presence, acknowledged in open-ended enquiry and intelligence, emerges from words and ideas explored in the poem. Is this an 'I' who might write essays, too?

*

As a scholar, 'I've always written essays', is what I say. It's a necessary part of my professional life. Research is delivered in essayistic forms, whether concisely in an article or fully sprung in monographs of many pages. I teach – no, tell – my students how to write. To my first years (all looking bored from the repetition), I say, 'An essay must an argument. A case put together logically: an introduction and a conclusion bookending a tight progressive structure. All sections of the essay must interleave, with as few deviations, digressions or repetitions as you can manage.' I remind them, in years two,

three and four, 'Everything should line up. Like a good herder, you must marshal readers through gates, closing them behind you'. As they sit in classrooms, writing to those 'aims and outcomes' that learning is spiked with these days, their risks managed and excitement deferred, 'Remember to marshal your thoughts in essays', I say, 'and close that gate behind you. Consider tone and voice. Write authoritatively. Minimize first person pronouns, all freighted with messy subjectivity and affect, and think in third person.' I hear exhaustion bubbling up through the phrases, 'Marshal thoughts; close gate; write authoritatively; think in third person'. Why such insistence when I know that behind the words only uncertainty and an endless running after meaning will prevail?

In the story of Persephone and her mother Demeter, or 'Ceres' as Boland calls her, reaching forward to a later time in history when she becomes all grain and golden harvest in her Latin iteration, Persephone vanishes one day while out in the fields. From the depths of the underworld, Hades has risen up, carried her down into his cloistered domain. Beside herself with grief, the earth cold and the harvest rotted, Demeter searches for her daughter, coursing the world, going round and around the same tracks, retracing her steps. Finally, in the textual present, in a perpetual winter, she makes a bargain with Zeus. If her daughter is returned, summer can rise again, and with it, fruitfulness and flowers. Trees on that road in Boland's poem, stripped of green, can leaf again, the seeds for a new beginning planted in an earth no longer frozen hard.

It's a story that haunts me in these hushed, empty corridors outside my office, where the slanting light picks out dust motes in the late morning sunshine. This myth spirals around uncertainty, loss; its only fixity being that, somewhere in the tale, the daughter disappears – the story's black hole. A while ago I remember saying, 'It's hard to believe right now, while she's still a teenager living at home, that one day I'll turn around, expecting her to be there at my back, but she'll be gone...'. A continuation of an earlier conversation, the two women in a university room, talking about work, and their daughters, and that remark, 'at my back but she'll be gone', a manner of speaking perhaps... yet, here and now, also a way of understanding that's straight out of the legend, the myth. For one minute Persephone's there, the next, she's –

'Are you there?', then the next, 'Where are you?'
Gone.

I said, 'That's what happens', the dialogue went. Two writers, two mothers speaking. With daughters each, remember? I've written these fragments down now to bring them back fully into this essay, these two teachers conversing – administration, students, colleagues' meetings that had to be attended to – and also thinking about writing essays. Thinking about writing an essay themselves, an essay by two individuals writing as a single 'I', but without heroics because they are two. And so I am wondering, might a different kind of writing rise from the page, then? Put together by two people who were at one time daughters, and whose daughters are leaving – have left – if you like, even so they might attempt to bring back and keep those girls with them as subjects, in words on the page, for their thoughts?

'An essay about all that... written together but not as one?', I said. In a way, it seemed quite a hard thing to do. Difficult because, 'One minute Persephone's there – as subject, as theme – the next, she's nowhere to be seen. Subject, object, running between the two... these terms morph and merge, and disappear in Michel Montaigne's essayistic present infinitive: 'to try', 'to venture', 'to attempt'.

There's an absence too of the concrete subject, the narrating persona – a question about agency in writing? What does this 'I' signify? Absent presence or present absence. To write with an 'I' is to use that vertical stroke that cancels and restitutes, that suggests not certainty of belief or position, or point of view but a fracturing present, slipping away all the same time. Not erased but under erasure, yet full of passion and desire still.

'Yes, I can do that', I said.

'And I can do that', I said.

Go after a thing that's barely delineated, that has already left the room and find another kind of writing in its wake. I can do that. Find a way of writing an essay uncoupled from 'opinion' or 'argument' or 'belief' or 'reading' – ideas that are integral to so many conventional essays on literature – and find instead another *modus operandi* that will let a new subject rise up in its place. Perhaps I can do this in this very text written by two teachers of the essay, two 'I's, who fashion or find the shape within it, to follow a

thread... Going after the subject, their subjects in this instance, their daughters, who have gone.

And it shouldn't be so hard... should it? Writing an essay isn't necessarily hard, compositional skills are deeply embedded within the academy's activities after all – but these two writers here want to write differently. Two 'I's who are not a 'we' or an 'us'. Two mothers forgoing the loftiness of the first person plural, the backwards and forwards of a question and answer where it's your turn or mine – to pursue, instead, their place in a myth, to use that as a metaphor for the process of writing itself. Paul Heilker begins his critique of conventional essays with an apology; "what follows is *not* an essay", he says, but "exactly the form I will soon be sharply criticizing"ⁱⁱ. "But let's not apologize; let's just do things differently." Essaying, an activity, a verb, not an object or artifact?"

I said, 'Let's give it a go!'

And, 'Yeah!' I said. 'Why not?'

So instead of opinion, 'abstract', 'summary', 'argument', instead of certainty, let's start with one question and allow it lead to another, trying for an 'I' in the voice of two people who are never 'we', so, I-I-I, to let the writing spin out, each giving way to the other, chasing each other's thoughts, erasing, replacing, rewriting. Letting go, too, of an anxiety over bearings that lead to never really risking anything, or enquiring. Letting go too of an overwhelming neediness 'to express oneself' and, instead, to find an 'I' that is porous?.

*

'I'd been thinking about our conversations about daughters growing up, our difficulties, our exhilarations... The subject of daughters arose because I'd been looking around the walls of your room,' I write now, 'with all those pictures your daughter had painted and drawn, her art and imagination lighting up the place where you work, bringing her in, bringing something personal into the midst of it.' I remember that day, and writing that line, 'One day I'll turn around – '

"There were portraits on the wall," I said, 'drawings and photographs, from when she was a wee curious girl to recent photographs, a young adult smiling self-consciously next to her father...' I can remember saying all of this. All of it a while ago, but also happening now, here on the page. I was talking about my daughter, as I was looking at the drawings

made by yours, and about how my daughter loved art, too, as a subject to study, though doubtful, unlike yours, about wanting to go on to Art College... 'Mine always wanted to go to Art College. And yes, the drawings here...' 'They're lovely.'

'They're lovely' is how the conversation ran on. Thoughts about daughters interspersed with more official things, but here they were in the offices too, the daughters in conversations though, actually, nowhere near. One had already left for art school, packed her things – the other getting ready to go... and by the time I write this essay, she too would have left. Gone, while the conversations are still running, ideas for this essay forming sentences on the page, and paragraphs. Filling up the page with my daughter's absence. Everything writing prepares us for – living with that vacancy, the space between the thought and the word – is here, and fugitive. 'One day I'll turn around,' I said, 'expecting her to be at my back and she'll be gone'.

And now – this from a recent text – 'there were tears for a while, and tears still, when she returns and then goes again'... Here we have the subject of the essay written down, yet also an empty space. And to think too, as I am writing this, as a mother, a writer, a scholar, how right it is to think about my subject being always before me in this way, yet also disappearing. 'I have a daughter who is leaving home...' as aposiopesis, a falling into silence. Like Persephone's disappearance in the myth, a chasm opened wide in the earth and pulling everything down inside. The 'I' left behind with nothing to say – because the essay's subject, its central agency – the daughter and the mother, the mother and the daughter – have, by now, both been overwritten by each other, unravelled by their own imperative to move forward, fleeing, chasing...

This is how and what a writer realizes about language and essays – how that one subject is already elusive, already gone, and the other, in flight behind her, in a state of perpetual question as she searches and mourns. Writing here as a pursuit played out in the infinitive clause: to hunt down, to fill the space the subject has left in her wake.

Always just out of reach. And beautifully so.

*

‘The opposite, then, all this, of those marshaled thoughts, rules for what essays should be.’ ‘This is a good theme to follow,’ I said in response to all these thoughts standing in a University office, ‘and involving the myth, too. I can see how that might work.’ Might become a new kind of essay to reflect on a freer, more fluid way of following the run of a line of ideas. To think, instead of predisposed meaning in words and sentences, to be released into flight on the page, into a different kind of enquiry and writing.

‘It’s a wonderful poem,’ I said, ‘for what we’re trying to dare here... To be inside the words of someone else, to feel loss *and* agency, both one “I” and another “I”, inhabiting the subject position of mothers or daughters.’ Even in the most critically acute piece of art, and I must remember to say this in my seminar, ‘I can see how the “I” disappears as activity of words, as the sentences become caught up in the momentum of following the subject to the ends of the earth...

‘Mmm...’

‘I see...’

‘Yes.’

‘For – ’

The legend will be hers as well as mine.

She will enter it. As I have.

And in that way, my students might come to rely less on convention petrified to a set of rigid rules for essay writing, but think on the page more freely, ask questions, allow themselves to be unsure of the outcome... Allow an idea such as, ‘I have a daughter who is leaving home’ take flight. That kind of tentativeness might be enough for a beginning, a way into a subject. To become the kind of essay that ‘I write’, and ‘I write’, and neither one nor the other, singular or both.

Standing there, with the drawings on the wall...

One of those conversations where family pushed through discussions of regulations and administrative matters, striking an altogether different note. A rawness underneath...

‘Because I knew then,’ I wrote later.

'I knew.' That the writing had already begun because the daughters were leaving, have gone.

*

'To conclude', I said before our year one class finished, 'your reader must feel that the route mapped out in your essay is the most convincing. You must know your end point even at the start.' Yet this closed system, a 'future anterior world, a closed loop that achieves a predetermined outcome', an 'ouroboros', as Sean Sturm describes this, that leads nowhere.ⁱⁱⁱ And how strange it seems to me now that I said all that. Made all those pronouncements, repressed the uncertainties, fantasies to the unconscious of composition. Because, of course, my experience of research and writing is more complex, never straightforward, and driven as much by obsessions and passions, as disinterested knowledge.

For here I am walking up to the heavy metal doors of the British Library at St Pancras to explore the publication of Windrush émigré writers newly arrived in a postwar London... And at that moment, who knows what will lie ahead? As a result of writing this essay as well, no doubt, the 'I' and 'here' in that sentence, feels like a ruse. I am not in London but in Dundee. Yet... here, also, I am, walking through the library foyer, rising up on the escalator to the reading rooms, seeing that central glass tower of books, written and bound in another age, a solid pillar of words and learning.

'Yes, I see what you're doing...'

'What's happening here...'

On all sides, readers are bent intently over desks, faces curiously lit by table lamps as they peer at papers. At the manuscript room's door, my library card is checked by benign but ever vigilant Cerberuses who regulate entry. They look at me, and then at my reader's card. Who is this? I wince inwardly. It is my face, I know, but the card's image doesn't match the one I hold in my mind. Instead, this photograph marks so painfully the chin folds I've acquired, the frown lines, crow feet and liver-spots of brown, irregular patches that are signs of age. A face I know that's not me. I want to protest, 'That doesn't really look like me!'

Yet here I am.

I present myself at the counter to collect the manuscripts requested. The counter staff looks again at my card, and then at me; a quick up-and-down glance. She disappears into the room at the back where I cannot see her, and returns with a bulky nondescript taupe wallet folder, and places it in a sturdy flat velveteen-lined wooden tray. The tray's padding is more mottled and a little less plush from years of use. Back at my desk, I undo the strings and open the folder delicately. It contains a thick sheaf of letters, some hand-written on faded blue aerogrammes, others typed on thin, translucent crackly sheets of off-white onion paper, pinned together by old paper clips that leave rusty marks tracteries when removed. These letters, from the poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite, are addressed to a Mr Andrew Salkey or a Mr Salkey and, later, to a Professor Andrew Salkey. Some are personal, long and earnest, testifying to a close friendship, companionship forged in turbulent times. Others are perfunctory, just offering quick news or apologies for absences. After a long day of reading I am lost in these missives, immersed in intoxicating conversations on art and politics, and vulnerabilities that haunt the writing process. One letter expresses regret about a pointed critique made, quoting from TS Eliot's theory of impersonality, 'no artist has his complete meaning alone', to soften the blow. This is a letter that brings into sharp relief the gravity of both critique and intent. Soon I feel I know the 'I' of these letters intimately, and warm to the mixture of seriousness, candour and humour threaded through the words. I write them down in my notebook. After a day of reading and transcribing, I am caught up in this exchange of words, and feel only the undulating swell and fall of words, unmoored from letter writer or receiver. I'm reading as if I am really the one written to, as if the intimacies really address me. I look up at the scholars in the long, straight and parallel rows of desks at the front and back of me, all engrossed in reading, and wonder if they are having their own fantasies about who the 'I' and the 'you' are. There's no end to it. It goes on.

*

So what, then, if we were not compelled to banish affect, uncertainty, not to think of doubt as a failing, but were allowed instead to come right inside an essay and roam

around in there, putting to rest that neutral universal^{iv} – that ‘one’ – so beloved of scholarly work? To abandon straining after ‘closure’, and instead let ourselves keep going, keep essaying. Lately, as a scholar and critic, I’ve been thinking more and more, ‘what if...’ ‘What if that became the starting point,’ I say.

What if, I want to tell my classes now, you don't really know exactly where you will arrive but only the terrain you want to explore? What if crafting isn't the same as control, but learning to carve with a loving, erotic feel for the grain of words, paring and shaping around the sudden knots and hollows of thought? What was that evocative line from *The Winged Seed*? ‘To build a shoe for a word to don and strike its way over the earth...’?^v

‘Yes, that...’

That...

And the yearning underlying everything.

Desire.

Because, look.... All around us daughters and mothers are saying goodbye. Packing bags. Telling daughters, that ‘it’s right that you’re leaving’, telling ourselves that it’s just about growing up. Sometimes shouting, sometimes also tearful. I tell my daughter that I am dreading her move. It seems so final, I say. The nameless narrator writes of her daughter in Jessie Greengrass’ novel, *Sight*, that ‘her progress towards adulthood is a kind of disappearance’; yet if she could, she would ‘reach across’ to where her daughter stands, ‘outlined against the violent yellow mass of a forsythia bush, and pull her back’. I feel the sudden shock of recognition: ‘To keep her always in my sight so that she might be nothing more than the sum of what I know of her.’^{vi} Arresting time, I’ve hoarded all my daughter’s soft toy animals, squeezed them under her desk, each one once lovingly named and part of play stories now lost: Holly, Anna, Starbuck, Possum. Here on my wall are family photos, of a very young girl hunting for newts, another clowning in glasses and a sunhat, and yet another of her standing behind her grandparents, already looking outside the frame. I realize, with a little shock, that she is in all of these family snaps. There is only one of me and I am holding her as a baby, my ‘I’ predicated on her.

'For goodness' sake, mum.' She tells me in exasperation. 'I'll be home in the holidays.'
'It's only Glasgow', my daughter says, 'don't be so melodramatic. It's not as if I'm on another continent. You can visit.'

As I write these words, I relive my silly distress at my now grown-up daughter who has left home. I feel that line in that corny, popular song, 'Slipping through my fingers all the time...' Walking forwards, looking back. The distance just a little further every time. Forwards, backwards between the push and pull of maternity. Why is this life as a mother not also a central part of my teaching, my writing? Is theorising not also a part of maternity, of thinking, of life?

There's another poem, I use, too, in my writing classes, with another Persephone. Alice Ostriker this time, describing the daughter coming out of the underworld, a dark moment, in heavy rain, but with a break in it; light's to come.^{vii} The speaker is the mother here:

you stared at me without love in your large eyes
that were filled with black sex and white powder

but this is what I expected when I embraced you
Your firm little breasts against my amplitude.

Get in the car I said
and then it was spring[.]

Students respond mutely to this poem. Mute, perhaps, because, my own barely checked emotion embarrasses them when I read it aloud. Mute, also, maybe because more than half the class are young men and this is mother-and-daughter stuff. Not what they expect from a poem, nor what they want out of a class. 'Dunno', they say, 'What's going on...'
They don't want some 'I' of mine, a mother's kind of me getting in the way of their learning, acquiring knowledge and skills. When it comes to writing about Ostriker's poem, most have very little to say. Where's the meaning in it, they think – the point, the end? Where's the sense in the thing that they might bang down upon the page?

My students don't write about the poem as an essay that might explore, think upon, what is the most basic pairing of human emotions. Love and loss. They write summaries, or they write about the myth itself. They write, 'This poem is about...', and then gather facts about Greek mythology, googling paragraphs of information. They don't let the poem come after them, enfold them. My students don't risk themselves with it. The boys don't show how terrified they are of what's in the poem, that they might not have the words or the experience to describe, or even know, the overwhelming force of those feelings Ostriker represents: the struggle endemic in the tight winding and unwinding of those mother-daughters bonds. And the girls, the girls...

The girls in the class are Persephones themselves, of course. They're nowhere near being Demeters... How can they possibly begin to say 'I know'? Right now they're eating that pomegranate; it's there by the can of coke on the tray on their bedroom floor. They can't begin to imagine being a mother yet. Not for a long time. This only occurs to me now, writing it down. How, for the girls, their mothers are too newly left behind them. They are too excited to be away from home to feel the pathos of the poem, or to know the full force of its meaning. Perhaps they don't want to think about the poem; perhaps such knowledge might threaten to return them to the sound of keening at their back, the pounding of feet in pursuit of daughters like a pulse in their own blood that they might, one day as mothers themselves, come to know. Mothers who were daughters once and daughters who might become mothers, subject positions that echo and morph into one another. Like the sentences I am trying to write here. The 'I' of my essay's persona that might become 'you'. The you that will in turn be another I. And so on, and so on... The undulating swell and fall of words unmoored..

I ...and I... and I...

'Not everything is about you,' my daughter said

*

Yet there it is: the single downward stroke of the alphabet signifying a self-contained, sentient individual, an 'I' who can tell the difference between what is within, and what without. An 'I' who expresses herself singularly and purposefully in language. The 'I am' that precedes the 'I write'. The 'I' of an essay by Kirsty Gunn and Gail Low - that one!

But what if it's the case of I write therefore I am? Roland Barthes has written, 'the subject is not anterior to language; he becomes subject only in so far as he speaks'; there are only locutors... only interlocutors.' These words are dizzying: 'I speak only in the name of a language: it is because I have written that I speak...'viii Language precedes that 'I', its performance leading to an illocutionary solidity every time the 'I' is used. In its simplest form: subject, verb predicate, object. I write an essay, 'When Daughters Leave: Essay Writing and The Fugitive Subject.' Yet the 'I' of any text is rhetorical, a performative enactment of subjectivity made possible only through the words, 'I've always worried about the 'I' in writing..'

Demeter. Ceres. That story is mine. And, 'Like the legend, I can enter it anywhere', the 'I' dissipating into all the poems, stanzas, phrases, words. The 'I' of this essay here willfully marked as two, then in time, perhaps, four, and over time, more, many more. As this essay runs on and multiplies from two writers to any number of readers, each one part of many, gone into a circle of love and maternity. An endlessly duplicated cycle of writing and reading... all these 'I's. Poems. Stories. Texts. Essays. All 'I's in the world... Just as Ostriker's poem, there is no full stop.

*

I have promised to ghost a friend's life. She is too ill to put pen to paper, or type to screen. I am to be an amanuensis. We speak about what we'd like to see in that essay, arrange a time for an interview and then record it. I collect past emails, interview transcripts and, later, spread them out on my dining room table to take stock. A mosaic of paper that I am to gather together into a life. I start to write, joining up texts, inhabiting her 'I', knowing all the time I am not her, but trying to work with the grain and timbre of her expressions and experiences to write her. When I lay my essay at her table, I say, 'I've tried to preserve your words and emotions, stitching together of the parts, rendering it seamless.' She reads the draft. Bewildered and cross, she says, 'Did I think this?' I apologise and but am secretly also affronted. 'This is you! I want to shout, everything I've written you have more or less said! More or less. Everything. That was you!

Between those words of mine, of course, between the 'everything' and the 'you', the 'more' and the 'less'...is a chasm. Like the opening in the earth that Hades, the King of the underworld, has created for himself and the daughter to drop clean through, only that infinite space is certain. The 'more' and the 'less' are poor attempts we have to work with.

So...

'One day I'll turn around, expecting her to be at my back, and she'll be gone.'

There's this.

An idea expressed in a university room.

'Could be a metaphor for writing an essay.'

'That I would write.'

'And I would write'

'Could be.'

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When I was five, my brother, sister and I marked the last day of every calendar year by bottling air. An odd, even bizarre ritual it might seem to be writing this down now, but one we undertook religiously then. Just before the midnight hour, each of us would run through rooms on the upper levels of our home clutching a small lidless jam jar tightly in one hand. Running in a clockwise direction, from my brother's small ochre-yellow room, up the small mezzanine flight of stairs to my sister's and my shared bedroom, through the connecting bathroom out into the spare room, we would race – arms akimbo – weaving between one another like demented human birds, waving small lidless jam jars in our outstretched arms. Through interconnected doorways of the upper level of the house, though never through my parents' bedroom, these jars were transformed into small receptacles to catch the very last air of the year. At midnight, we would all gather to screw on lids. Each jar would be labelled and placed next to another on the shelf of our high bookcase. In my mind's eye, the orderly rows of jars, labels carefully turned to face forward – 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968 – are still there on that shelf. One year, I don't know

why, we spent our largesse, opened some jars and took deep breaths. Shortly after, but I can't remember exactly when, we all forgot about collecting air.

Perhaps the 'I' is like a jar of last year's air: vital, real yet also an activity of the imagination, contained in receptacles of language, everyday rituals, familial and cultural roles, and no less passionately held to. Words extend beyond myself, beyond the moment of writing, beyond my experience, curiously impersonal. Yet, Denise Riley writes in *Impersonal Passion*, despite language's impersonality, 'in the same blow, it constitutes the fiber of the personal', 'which courses like blood through its speakers.'^{xix} The life blood of love, the keening sound of loss.

For who is the 'I', at the end of the essay, the she who writes? A breath? A line? A sigh? At some point, the girls were here, they were with us in the room...The gate is open. Summer recess and the light is dim.

'I am away' she writes on a piece of paper and pins it to the door.

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ⁱ Boland, Eavan. (1994). 'The Pomegranate'. Available from <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/pomegranate> (accessed 30 October, 2017).

ⁱⁱ Heikler, P. (1996). *The Essay: Theory and Pedagogy for an Active Form* (Urbana, Illinois: 1996), xix.

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- iiiiii Sturm, S. R. (2012). 'Terra (In)cognita: Mapping Academic Writing', *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* [online], 16(2), <http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct12/sturm.htm> (accessed 15 August 2017), 7.
- iv The phrase 'neutral universal' is taken from Smith, Zadie. (2009). *Changing My Mind* (London and New York, Hamish Hamilton, 2009).
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